

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Holdout Imperial Japanese Army Soldiers Rest in Peace in Heroes Cemeteries in Indonesia

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What follows is an essay contributed by Associate Professor Eiichi Hayashi of Nishōgakusha University. It should be noted that the views expressed herein are entirely those of Professor Hayashi himself.

In June 2023, Their Majesties Emperor and Empress of Japan made an official visit to Indonesia. During their trip, the couple visited the National Main Heroes Cemetery in Kalibata and offered flowers to its white central cenotaph modeled after five bamboo spears. Built in 1954 in the rich greenery of South Jakarta, this heroes cemetery is the largest war memorial in Indonesia honoring fallen patriots who had dedicated their own lives to the cause during the war of independence with the Netherlands in the latter half of the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Among those buried in this cemetery are twenty-eight holdout Imperial Japanese Army soldiers. One may wonder how these twenty-eight Japanese soldiers came to be buried in an Indonesian cemetery for national heroes.

Of all the holdout Imperial Japanese Army soldiers in Indonesia, as many as 903 are identified by name.<sup>2</sup> The majority were young, low-rank soldiers who had been mobilized by the Imperial Japanese Army to join the occupation of Dutch East India, which lasted for

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1 Kato Tsuyoshi. “Seijiteki imikukan no henyo katei—Shokuminchi shuto kara nashonaru kyapitaru e [Transformation process of political semantic space—From Colonial Capital to National Capital].” Tsubouchi Yoshihiro, ed. <*Sogoteki chiiki kenkyu*>*wo motomete—Tonan ajia zo wo tegakarini* [Seeking <Comprehensive Regional Studies>—Clues to the Image of Southeast Asia]. Kyoto University Press. 1999. p. 223.

2 Fukushi Tomo no Kai, ed. *Indonesia dokuritsu sensō ni sankā shita “Kaeranakatta Nipponhei” issen-meī no koe—Fukushi Tomo no Kai, No.200 “Geppo” bassuisyū* [Voices of 1,000 Japanese soldiers who participated in the Indonesian War of Independence and did not return home—Fukushi Tomo no Kai, No.200 “Monthly Bulletin” excerpts] (privately printed book). 2005. p. 382.

about three and a half years from March 1942.<sup>3</sup>

Reasons why these Japanese soldiers did not return home after the end of the war vary from coercion to voluntary decisions. For instance, Superior Private Miyayama Shigeo decided to stay on “to die for the cause of Indonesia’s independence,” while First Class Private Hirooka Isamu remained because he was familiar with the local state of affairs and well-versed in the vernacular language. Paymaster Sergeant Yamanashi Shigeru, Corporals Fujiyama Hideo and Takasu Shigeo, and Lance Corporals Ikegami Naruto and Motobō Takatoshi, for their part, admitted that they had been fooled by groundless rumors. Others included Corporal Nakamura Tsunegorō, who had become tired of the military; Lance Corporal Shida Yasuo, who had struck a superior officer and feared that he might be tossed in detention; Provost Sergeant Major Sugiyama Nagamoto and Provost Sergeants Tanaka Toshio and Yamaguchi Shōji, who feared that they might be executed as war criminals; and Sergeant Hayakawa Kiyoshi, Corporal Doki Tokiji, First Class Private Shimooka Zenji, and Second Class Private Nanri Isamu, who claimed that they had been abducted and confined by Indonesian locals.<sup>4</sup> Of course, one’s reason to remain in a former battlefield after a war is not something that can be explained in one word. In the case of Sergeant Ono Sakari, who decided to remain in Bandung in western Java, for instance, compound considerations and reasonings informed his decision, including: his rejection of Japan’s unconditional surrender, his suspicion that he had been overlooked for promotion in the army, his pride as an active military

personnel, his serious character with a strong sense of responsibility, and his personal status as a third son of a Hokkaido farming family, which would not allow him to own his farmland and become self-sustaining if he returned to Japan.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side of the coin, why did the Indonesian side decide to accept the holdout Imperial Japanese Army soldiers as its allies in its fight against the Dutch? Behind this decision was Indonesia’s desperate need for the arms and human resources held by the now-defunct Imperial Japanese Army.

With the declaration of independence on August 17, 1945, a republic government was established in Indonesia. Nevertheless, in the ensuing month, British troops advanced into Indonesia on behalf of the Allies, causing armed conflicts in various locations. These conflicts culminated in a war of independence. During the earlier stage of the war, the country’s capital was moved from Jakarta in western Java to Yogyakarta in central Java, making central and eastern Java a major battleground.

Under these circumstances, a variety of militant forces sprouted in Indonesia, from regular military to militias, all of which attempted to contact the Japanese soldiers remaining in the country. Sergeant Taira Teizō, who had remained in Bali, for instance, was approached by an Indonesian with an offer of “a two-rank promotion to an officer.” Engineer Corps Sergeant Higuchi Osamu, being—unfortunately for him—an expert in explosives, was abducted in Aceh in northern Sumatra by

3 Since there were also a small number of military officers, military civilians, ethnic Korean or Taiwanese soldiers, and civilians (albeit few), some researchers prefer to call them “holdout Japanese” instead.

4 Hayashi Eiichi. *Zanryū Nipponhei—Aja ni ikita 10,000nin no sengo* [Holdout Japanese soldiers—postwar days of 10,000 holdout Japanese soldiers who decided to stay behind in Asia]. Chūōkōronsha. 2012. Chapter 2.

5 Hayashi Eiichi. *Zanryū Nipponhei no shinjitsu—Indoneshia dokuritsu sensō wo tatakatta otokotachi no kiroku* [Truth about the holdout Japanese soldiers—the records of men who fought the Indonesian independence war]. Sakuhinsha. 2007. Chapter 2.

Indonesians and threatened by a military officer with execution if he refused to collaborate.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, as the motivations of holdout Japanese soldiers and the ulterior motive on the Indonesian side dovetailed, a large number of Imperial Japanese Army soldiers decided to stay behind, mainly in western Java and northern Sumatra. Postwar memoirs and testimonies report that those holdout Japanese soldiers repaired and remodeled arms belonging to the Imperial Japanese Army, conducted military trainings for Indonesian youths, and spearheaded guerilla warfare, thus contributing to Indonesia's war of independence. There is, however, no primary source to back this up, and these rumors have long remained unverified.

A battlefield diary kept by Sergeant Ono Sakari, which the present author unearthed in 2004, revealed some of the realities of the holdout Imperial Japanese Army soldiers during the Indonesian War of Independence.<sup>7</sup> Ono kept this diary from December 30, 1945, through November 26, 1948. He recorded his day-to-day life and experiences in the battlefield with brutal frankness. Careful reading of his diary reveals that holdout Japanese soldiers repeatedly aligned and realigned themselves with the war effort as the war of independence progressed and that their roles changed constantly in each phase of the war.

The Indonesian War of Independence, which started in August 1945 and lasted until the end of 1949, was fought both on battlefields as well as around diplomatic tables. During the struggle, the Republic of Indonesia and

the Dutch governments concluded armistice agreements twice, both of which were broken because of military aggression by the Dutch side. Toward the end of 1948, the Republic of Indonesia faced a crisis situation when its capital city of Yogyakarta fell to the Dutch forces and its President Sukarno and Vice President Hatta were hauled away. To cope with this situation, the Republic of Indonesia side established a government in exile in Sumatra and the Republic's army led by General Sudirman launched a guerilla war against the Dutch forces. Backed by international public opinion, sovereignty was eventually transferred to the Republic through the Hague Agreement in 1949, leading to the restart of the Republic of Indonesia in its present form as a united republic in August 1950.

Sergeant Ono, keeper of the battlefield diary, was discharged from the Imperial Japanese Army in December 1945 and joined the Indonesian army. Becoming acquainted with Ichiki Tatsuo, an advocate of Pan-Asianism, in Yogyakarta, Ono was so mesmerized by Ichiki's philosophy that he pledged, "Japan, which liberated Indonesia from Dutch oppression, is a nation of yellow race. We are brothers belonging to the same Asian race. In order to bring peace to Asia, I hereto pledge to wholeheartedly fight together and die together hand in hand with my Indonesian brothers."<sup>8</sup> Ono co-authored a guerilla warfare manual with Ichiki and devoted his time and energy to training the Indonesian regular army. As the battle situation altered, Ono found himself more in the frontline, leading the actual battle. Ono noted in his battlefield diary, "I am now resolutely prepared to deliver tripod

6 Ibid.

7 "Ikita akashi: Indonesia dokuritsu sensō no nikki, ge—"Tsutaetai" hikitsugu negai [Proof of his life: Diary of the Indonesian War of Independence, part 2—Taking over their wish to 'pass on']. General culture page of *The Asahi Shimbun* morning edition. November 3, 2005.

8 Ono Sakari (edited and commented by Hayashi Eiichi). *Nampō gunsei kankei shiryō 42: Indonesia zanryū Nipponhei no shakaishi—Rafumatto • Ono Sakari jijoden* [Documents related to military administration in the southern territories #42: social history of the holdout Japanese soldiers in Indonesia—autobiography of Rahmat Sakari Ono]. Ryūkeishosha. 2010. p. 48.

for machine guns [Type 92 heavy machine gun used by the Imperial Japanese Army, to be exact] to the rear of the enemy line.”<sup>9</sup>

Being an informal presence, Ono and other holdout Japanese soldiers found themselves in a predicament during the truce negotiations with the Dutch and the reorganization and rationalization of the regular army. In order to cope with this deadlock, they formed the Special Guerrilla Troops (Pasukan Gerilya Istimewa or PGI) exclusively among themselves. PGI, organized under the auspices of Lieutenant Colonel R. Soerachmad, commander of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Division of eastern Java, was joined by some thirty holdout Japanese soldiers who were scattered around the eastern Java area. Yoshizumi Tomegorō was appointed PGI’s commander and Ichiki became its deputy commander. These two were old acquaintances, having migrated to the prewar Dutch East India to work for the *Nichi-Ran Shōgyō Shimbunsha* (Japan-Dutch Journal of Commerce) in Batavia and being closely associated with the human network around Iwata Ainosuke, co-founder of the *Aikokusha*, a rightwing nationalist organization. They were also older than other holdout Japanese soldiers. During a truce, PGI attempted to violate the armistice agreement by attacking a frontline base of the Dutch forces. When Commander Yoshizumi died of illness, however, internal feuding erupted, leading to the breakup of the group. After Ichiki, who succeeded Yoshizumi, was killed in battle, PGI was reorganized as a troop (Pasukan Untung

Suropati 18 or PUS18) under the 4th Brigade.<sup>10</sup>

PUS18 was headed by Commander Sugiyama Nagamoto and Deputy Commander Ono Sakari, under whom Sugiyama, Ono, Yamano Gorō, Hayashi Genji, Sakai Tomio, Maekawa Tatsuji, Hirooka Isamu, Wakabayashi (first name unknown), and several Indonesian officers led their respective subdivisions. It is recorded in a detailed Indonesian-language report on battles that, in the battle of Banjar Patroman in February 1949, PUS18 took out some fifty Dutch soldiers, including a captain. Although one cannot find this incident in the official Indonesian war history, it was doubtlessly a remarkable achievement.<sup>11</sup>

These contributions to the war of independence by the holdout Japanese soldiers were well recognized to the extent that, among them, Sugiyama, Ono, Yamano, Sakai, Maekawa, and Hirooka were distinguished with guerilla medals and local veteran’s certificates as well as soldier’s pensions by the Indonesian Army. They were also honored with official military funerals and burial in the heroes cemeteries.<sup>12</sup> Today, Yamano and Maekawa rest in peace in the National Main Heroes Cemetery in Kalibata, while Sugiyama, Ono, Sakai, and Wakabayashi were buried in local heroes cemeteries.<sup>13</sup>

The Reiwa Emperor and Empress’s visit to the heroes cemetery in Kalibata was, thus, significant in the sense that it shed light on this history. Coincidentally, Emperor Emeritus also

9 Ibid. p. 105.

10 Hayashi Eiichi. *Tōbu Jawa no Nipponjin butai—Indoneshia zanryu nihonhei wo hikiita sannin no otoko* [Troops made of Japanese soldiers in East Java—Three Men who led the holdout Japanese soldiers in Indonesia]. Sakuhinsha. 2009. Chapters 4, 5.

11 Ibid. *Zanryū Nipponhei no shinjitsu* [Truth about the holdout Japanese soldiers]. Chapter 6. “Ikita akashi: Indoneshia dokuritsu sensō no nikki, jō—Kesshi no hibi, kokumei ni [Proof of his life: Diary of the Indonesian War of Independence, part 1—Clear record of the desperate days].” General culture page of *The Asahi Shimbun* morning edition. November 2, 2005.

12 Until these holdout Japanese soldiers obtained Indonesian nationality in the early 1960s, they remained stateless.

13 Among the members of *Fukushi Tomo no Kai* (Yayasan Warga Persahabatan), a benevolent society organized in 1979 by the holdout Japanese soldiers, many of those who did not reside in the capital city were buried in ordinary cemeteries instead of heroes cemeteries.

chose the National Main Heroes Cemetery in Kalibata as a destination during his first overseas visit after his abdication, and he had met bereaved families of the holdout Japanese soldiers in Vietnam during his pre-abdication Imperial Memorial Visit. During the official visit this time, the Emperor and Empress Reiwa chose to receive the children and grandchildren of the holdout Imperial Japanese Army soldiers in Indonesia for the first time as emperor and empress. It is sincerely hoped that, through the passing of the torch in the form of memorial visits from the Heisei to Reiwa Emperors/Empresses, friendship and goodwill relations between Japan and Southeast Asian countries will be deepened further.